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ABSTRACT

This observational study examined code switching, the alternation of language or dialects to convey social meaning, in 6-year-old Spanish-English bilinguals. Specifically, the study attempted to determine which of the five variables were associated with code switches: physical setting; type of activity; characteristics of the addressee (age, ethnicity, linguistic ability); topic of conversation; linguistic intention (requesting help, arguing, etc.). The study also attempted to investigate any differences between children's and adults' code switching. Subjects were four children attending a bilingual day care center-kindergarten. Children's language production and concurrent behavior were recorded. From the data, seven types of activity settings were isolated. Episodes of interactive speech were analyzed for the five variables studied. Results indicate that the only variable having a clear effect was the addressee's linguistic ability; children were able to choose and maintain the language that their listeners spoke best. The major difference between adults' speech and the four children's speech samples was the low incidence of children's conversational (mid-episode) as opposed to situational code switching. (SB)

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CODE-SWITCHING IN FOUR SIX-YEAR-OLD SPANISH-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, La., March, 1977. It is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Rules of code-switching in young Spanish-English speakers: An exploratory study of language socialization," 1976. Berkeley, University of California. The author acknowledges her committee members, Professors Millie Almy, Paul R. Ammon, and John J. Gumperz, for their guidance and the University of California Chancellor's Patent Fund for financial support to do the study.

ABSTRACT

It is sometimes assumed in the United States that children whose first language is not English or who come to school bilingual will need formal training in English, especially if the children are members of a minority group. The purpose of this observational study, carried out in a kindergarten and day care center, was to see exactly how four six-year-old Spanish-English bilinguals used both their languages (code-switched) in naturalistic settings. An analysis of their spontaneous talk in instructional and noninstructional situations showed that the children were generally able to speak the two languages fluently and to control a range of styles within each language. They could maintain conversations in either Spanish or English, primarily depending on the linguistic ability of their listener.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently investigators of child language have focused more on the acquisition of linguistic forms or structures than on children's use of those forms in naturalistic settings. A specific aspect of language use that has seldom been studied in bilingual or bidialectal children is code-switching, or the alternation of languages or dialects to convey social meaning.

When a speaker code-switches, he/she stops speaking language A and begins to speak language B, or he/she chooses one set of features of language A over another set. These features may be phonological, lexical, or syntactic. According to Blom and Gumperz (1972), there are two general kinds of code-switching, situational and conversational. Situational switching involves a change in setting, topic of conversation, or participants; the speaker's perception of the ongoing activity changes. An example is the switch from colloquial Spanish among students to English when a teacher joins the conversation. The activity has changed from an informal chat to a formal conversation.

Conversational switching, on the other hand, occurs within a single activity. Two languages may be mixed in the same sentence to convey a single message. An example from a Spanish-English bilingual in a situation where English is commonly used (e.g., at work) might be:

> I just saw Bob, el pobrecito (= the poor thing). Did you know his car was stolen?

The temporary use of Spanish is a deviation from the norm that carries social meaning. Since Spanish is the language of the speaker's ethnic group, it conveys a greater feeling of sympathy than an English equivalent.

The importance of code-switching lies in its social meaning. Especially in situations of rapid cultural change (e.g., urban areas of the United States), choosing one language over another conveys social information about factors such as speakers' ethnic group membership, values, and relationships of power. The language of an ethnic minority may serve as an identity-marker to maintain a separation between the in-group and the out-group.

Although Gumperz and others (Blom and Gumperz 1972, Gumperz 1974, Gumperz and Hernández 1972) have studied rules of code-switching in adults, there are very few studies of children's code-switching. The purpose of this observational study was to describe in what ways four bilingual six-year-olds code-switched to demonstrate their social and linguistic competencies.

The research questions were:

1. Which of the following social and linguistic variables affect the children's choice between languages:

   (a) Physical setting (classroom vs. playground)

   (b) Activity (free play vs. teacher-structured task)

   (c) Features of the addressee (age, ethnicity, linguistic ability)

   (d) Topic of conversation (television show, family dog, etc.)

   (e) Linguistic intention (requesting help, arguing, etc.)

2. Are the children's rules situational or conversational?

3. How do these six-year-olds' rules of code-switching differ from adults' rules?

METHOD

An ethnographic approach was used to carry out the study. The four children and their parents were viewed more as informants than as subjects so that what they said about their own speech was treated as part of the data to be analyzed and not as a source of bias. The categories used for analysis were not established ahead of time but were developed after studying the daily activities and conversations of the children in three settings, the kindergarten classroom, the playground, and the day care center.

The Site and the Four Children

The site of the study was a combined day care center-kindergarten for children from three to seven years of age. Twenty of the 50 children in day care also attended the affiliated kindergarten in the mornings. The center was an alternative school, established by a group of Chicano parents in the San Francisco Bay Area. The parents and staff valued the maintenance of the Spanish language and their Mexican or Latin American heritage. The educational approach was what may be called a "whole child" approach. Teachers were concerned with the cognitive, emotional, and political aspects of education. The kindergartners, for example, heard several lectures on Mexican history and politics during the period of data collection.

All teachers and aides at the site were either bilingual in Spanish and English or monolingual in Spanish. There were two women kindergarten teachers, who spoke both Spanish and English with the children, and one male teacher, who was born in Mexico and spoke only Spanish to the

children although he too was bilingual. The woman aide in the kindergarten was a Spanish monolingual from Mexico.

The four children studied were chosen on the basis of (1) my observations in the kindergarten and day care center over a two-month preliminary period and (2) the three kindergarten teachers' rank-ordering of the "most bilingual" kindergartners. My ratings were based on frequency of individual children's talk and frequency of code-switching, i.e., use of both Spanish and English. The criteria used, then, were based on production and not on comprehension. The means of assessment was impressionistic but was justified because of a lack of formal instruments that measure language use outside of testing situations, specifically the child's talkativeness.

Of the 20 kindergartners observed, many were bilingual, but only four were both bilingual and sufficiently talkative to be subjects. The four were bilingual in terms of both comprehension and production and demonstrated their bilingualness by talking relatively often. These features were crucial for collecting enough data for analysis.

Three of the children were boys; one was a girl. They ranged in age from 6 years,0 months to 6 years,2 months. The parents of two boys and one girl were not college-educated while the parents of one boy were both graduate students. In interviews with the parents, I found that they all favored the goals of the center to maintain their children's ability to speak Spanish and actively to teach about Mexican/Chicano culture.

Data Collection

Data were collected in two phases. During the first, or preliminary, phase I familiarized myself with the routines of the children and staff while they became accustomed to me and the use of a tape recorder.

During the second, or recording, phase, either the second observer or I[1] observed, one at a time, for a one- to two-hour period and essentially followed the four children around to audiotape their speech and write a brief record of concurrent behaviors. Data were collected most often in the morning, between 9:00 a.m. and 12:00 n. Although the method of recording was obtrusive, the children became accustomed to it quickly.

[1] I am Japanese-American, bilingual in English and Spanish, more proficient or dominant in English. The second observer was a male Anglo, also English dominant. Anglo is used here to mean someone who is not a member of an ethnic minority. It is used descriptively, not pejoratively.

Our equipment consisted of a battery-run tape recorder carried in a shoulder bag with a directional microphone attached to the left wrist of the observer. This allowed us to take notes with the free hand. On the coding sheet we identified the speaker, his or her addressee, briefly described the nonlinguistic context, and wrote speech fragments so that the context noted could later be matched with recorded talk.

RESULTS

Categories of Analysis

At the end of seven weeks, we had recorded 17.5 hours of spontaneous talk during 45 hours of observation, chiefly in the kindergarten building, which was separate from the day care center.[2] Children's speech in the playground, in a nearby park, and in the day care center was also recorded.

[2] Supplementary data, communicative tasks and interviews with the children and their parents, were also collected. Only the major source of data, the spontaneous talk, is presented in this paper.

The first task of analysis was to identify categories of both nonlinguistic and linguistic features by (1) breaking the talk and activity into segments for analysis, and (2) setting a framework for determining situational vs. conversational switches.

Seven types of nonlinguistic activity settings or group types were isolated:

(1) Whole class: teachers usually talked most of the time and children talked very little.

(2) Small group-task: children were engaged in task-oriented activity, e.g., art work or language arts, initiated by the teacher.

(3) Small group-game: children themselves chose to play a game with rules.

(4) Small group-dramatic play: children assigned roles for fantasy play.

(5) Small group-free play: children engaged in unstructured, self-chosen activity, e.g., playing on swings.

(6) Small group-eating: snack or lunchtime with teachers and other children from kindergarten and the day care center.

(7) Dyad: an adult with one of the four children, often one of the observers asking for information about the children's activities.

In order to analyze the kinds of code-switching that occurred within these activity settings, I transcribed the recorded segments that contained code-switches for later analysis. All recorded segments were categorized according to linguistic units of three kinds, the episode, the utterance, and the subepisode, by referring to the transcriptions or listening repeatedly to the tapes.

The episode was the main unit of analysis, an interactive unit which involved:

(1) At least one of the four children talking with at least one other person.

(2) A recorded response, either written in our notes if the response was nonverbal, or audiotaped if it was verbal.

(3) A point or topic for the interaction that was clear to the coder.

(4) A recorded beginning and endpoint, usually marked by a change in participants or in topic of talk.

The episode was also the framework for differentiating between situational and conversational switches. Situational switches were defined as occurring between episodes while conversational switches occurred within episodes.

An utterance was a group of words, expressing a single idea or proposition, and/or was separated from the previous utterance by a pause of one second or more (adapted from Cherry 1975).

The subepisode was a catch-all category for segments of talk which:

(1) Did not involve any of the four children.

(2) Involved one of the children but had no focus clear to the observer.

(3) Were generally inaudible recordings.

A reliability check was done with an assistant who was not involved in the data collection. Based on Barker and Wright's percentage of agreement, reliability figures were .85 for episodes, .99 for utterances, and .83 for subepisodes (Wright 1967).

There was a total of 370 episodes for all four children and 187 subepisodes. Episodes lasted from a few seconds to more than half an hour, e.g., when the interactive focus was a game. Using the episode as a framework, we coded 306 examples of situational switches and only 64 conversational switches.

Variables Associated with Code-Switches

In the first research question we asked which of five variables were associated with code-switches:

(1) Physical setting

(2) Activity

(3) Features of the listener or addressee

(4) Topic of conversation

(5) Intention of the speaker

To answer the question, we tabulated each child's episodes according to categories within each variable, e.g., physical setting was broken down into kindergarten classroom, day care center, and playground. Activity consisted of the seven group types mentioned earlier (whole class, small group-task, etc.). Neither the physical setting nor the child's activity was associated with a preference for one language over the other.

Three different features of the addressee were analyzed: (1) age, (2) ethnicity, and (3) linguistic ability. Age (adult vs. peer) did not clearly affect language choice. Similarly, the addressee's ethnicity (Anglo vs. Chicano) did not explain code-switches. The four children did not have a simple rule such as "Speak Spanish only to people who appear to be Chicano or Latin."

The only variable that had a clear effect was one feature of the addressee: the listener's linguistic ability. By the end of the recording phase, we had assigned all staff and children to five categories, according to their ability to produce Spanish and English:

(1) Spanish monolingual (SM)

(2) Spanish dominant bilingual (SD)

(3) Balanced bilingual (BB)

(4) English dominant bilingual (ED)

(5) English monolingual (EM)

Tabulation of episodes in which the identity of the child's listener(s) was known showed that the children generally chose the listener's dominant language. (See Figures 1-4.) The total number of episodes tabulated (413) on the graphs exceeds the number of episodes recorded (370) because in some episodes the child addressed listeners of different abilities. An example of this kind of episode follows. In it one of the four children studied, Arturo[1], talks first to Carlos, an ED child, then to Jorge, a SM child.

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[1]Pseudonyms for the children are used.

Their play involves filling a balloon with water and playing with toy astronauts in a sink in the kindergarten classroom. At Utterance 4, Arturo code-switches to Spanish to address Jorge:

Speaker	Addressee	Utterance
Arturo	Carlos	1. Carlos, I'm going to (unclear) this thing.
Carlos	Arturo	2. Where's the astronaut?

Speaker	Addressee	Utterance
Carlos	Arturo	3. Where's the astronaut?
Arturo	Jorge	4. Carlos me lo dio. (Translation: Carlos gave it to me.)
		5. Yo hallé éste, Jorge. (I found this one, Jorge.)
Jorge	Arturo	6. No, éste no es tuyo. (No, this isn't yours.)
Arturo	Jorge	7. ¡Yo lo hallé! (But I found it!)

The major finding of the study was that these four children were able to choose and maintain the language that their listeners spoke best in both instructional and noninstructional settings. Although there were wide individual variations when they spoke to bilinguals, all four spoke Spanish to SMs and English to EMs between 84 and 100% of the time. (Since the monolinguals with one exception comprehended the language they did not speak, the use of that language probably did not lead to gaps in communication.)

Specific cases of the rule the four children applied, "Speak the language your listener speaks best/most," were:

Choose:	when the addressees are:	
	Monolingual	
1. Spanish	SM (Spanish monolingual)	
2. English	EM (English monolingual)	
	Bilingual and Monolingual	
3. Spanish, or	ED + SM	
4. English to ED (English dominant) & Spanish to SM	ED + SM	
5. English	ED + EM	
6. English, or	SD + EM	
7. Spanish to SD (Spanish dominant) & English to EM	SD + EM	

Another rule that the four children and others in the setting applied was what the second observer termed the "inertial" rule, or "Speak

the language in which you were just addressed" (Chambers 1975). In other words, it was very natural for speakers to respond in Spanish if one spoke to them in Spanish.

Differences between Adults and Children

The four children had relatively few episodes containing mid-episode, or conversational, switches. Of these 64 conversational switches, only a dozen contained midutterance switches. The answer to the second research question, are the children's rules conversational or situational, then, was that they were situational. One specific aspect of the situation, listener's linguistic ability, seemed to determine their language choice. Code-switches within conversations occurred primarily to accommodate the differing abilities of listeners, so that they conveyed a straightforward message, "I am speaking to X in the language he/she speaks best."

This does not mean that there was no evidence of conversational rules. The children did seem to switch within episodes to (1) specify one addressee when speaking to more than one bilingual (e.g., a SD and an ED), and (2) to quote another person's speech in the language of the quotation. These are both functions of code-switching in adult speech (Gumperz 1974).

The major difference between adults' speech and the four children's samples was the lack of conversational code-switching. Frequent switching among adults is a device to mark the differences between one group of speakers and another. The ability to do this would depend on the speakers' awareness that they can highlight ethnic differences through choice of the appropriate language. Although one of the children, Manuel, stated that

he was ethnically different (Mexican, not American) during his interview, none of the four seemed to mark this kind of awareness by code-switching.

There were examples in the data of the four children excluding other children from play areas, or "territories." Their way of excluding out-group members was direct and did not involve code-switching. For example, Gloria told a younger child from the day care center, "You can't come in!" to inform her that only kindergartners were allowed in the classroom. In addition, we did not observe bilingual children excluding monolingual speakers from conversations by switching to the language the monolingual did not speak.

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